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AUTHOR JERCNIS, CHARLES
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ABSTRACT

ALTHOUGH BOOKS OF SOLELY BLACK LITERATURE ARE BEING PUBLISHED IN ABUNDANCE, AN ANTHOLCGY REPRESENTING BOTH BLACK AND WHITE AUTHORS IS NEEDED, FCR ONLY THROUGH INCLUDING THE LITERARY TRADITIONS OF ALL AMERICANS CAN THE NATIONAL EXPERIENCE BE ACCURATELY REFLECTED. TEE ORIGINS OF AFRO-AMERICAN POETRY ARE FOUND IN THE LATE 18TH CENTURY, AND WITH THE "HARLEM RENAISSANCE" OF THE 1920'S, BLACK POETS DEVELOPED NOT ONLY UNIQUE THEMES BUT THE BEGINNINGS OF A SELF-CONSCIOUS MOVEMENT. CF THE TWC GREAT BLACK POETS PRODUCED IN THIS CENTURY, ROBERT HAYDEN DCES NOT LIMIT HIMSELF TO BLACK THEMES OR TO A SEPARATE BLACK CRITICAL STANDARD, WHEREAS LEROI JONES IS SEEKING A "BLACK CRITERICN" FOR HIS WORK. THE BULK OF BLACK POETRY, HOWEVER, STILL IN ITS INFANCY, IS FREQUENTLY GUILTY CF TEDIOUS THEMATIC REPETITICN AND LCSS OF ARTISTIC CONTROL. THE OBJECTIVITY AND DISTANCE PROVIDED BY WESTERN CRITICISM CAN BENEFIT THE BLACK WRITER. BY GRAPPLING WITH THE RESULTANT TENSION BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE VISION AND OBJECTIVE EVALUATION BLACK ARTISTS CAN DEVELOP AND MATURE. (MF)

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BLACK POETRY: SOME RANDOM NOTES

"Nobody (almost) knows my name."

If you weren't cautious in your judgment, you might mistake Gwendolyn Brooks for an Englishwoman's name. Likewise, you might think (if you recall your composers) Robert Hayden is of, say, Austrian origin. Someone surnamed DuBois could easily be from France. But if one were to mention Leroi Jones, you'd have a better chance at pinpointing their origin. That's right. They're black Americans. Oh, and by the way, they also happen to be similar in the fact that they're American writers.

For many people, these are only names and have no more significance than four names I may have culled from a Harlem phonebook. The problem (and the point here) is that these people merit attention as serious literary figures in this country.

Point: they aren't getting proper attention.

At a conference of black writers in 1959, Langston Hughes submitted a paper in which he stated: "The days of the Negro's passing as a writer and by purely because of his 'negritude' are past." Certainly it would have been difficult for Mr. Hughes (or anyone at that time) to anticipate the great cultural revolution of the sixties when, as a matter of fact, Black became, if not beautiful in everyone's eyes, highly Marketable. Thus, an astounding number of books by black authors, good and bad, have flooded the shelves of bookstores. You can find excellent anthologies of both poetry and prose by Afro writers. "Not getting enough attention?" you say. Exactly: because if you leisurely stroll to the opposite end of the same shop, choose at random any anthology of American Literature, and turn to the Author's Index, you will most likely not find any Negro writers included. And you will have witnessed for yourself the literary counterpart of once-legal segregation. That black writers have their own traditions, their own

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themes, their own purposes--all of which are sometimes peculiar to themselves--does not constitute sufficient grounds for their separation from the main currents of our literature. If allowances can be made for separate traditions, such as the New England or Tall-Tale traditions, then why shouldn't black literature be considered a separate tradition within the American literary scene? The present system of publishing black anthologies and white anthologies separately, though it makes both available, does not treat them as what they, in fact, are--offspring of the same parent. The result is a deprivation, not for Negro students, but for many white, non-urban school-children who may never even hear of Ralph Ellison or Leroi Jones.

Point rephrased: Needed is a competent anthology of all American authors, black and white.

BLACK POETRY BEGINS

Strictly speaking, Afro-American poetry had its beginnings in the late eighteenth century with the publication of some poems by Negro slaves of the Boston area. The first authors of any national prominence, however, did not emerge until the late nineteenth century with the poems of Dunbar and Dubois. At this early stage, black poetry was not far removed from the Negro folksong tradition and was often characterized by religious content and dialect style. The better of the non-dialect poems were often rigid in form and sometimes trite in content; the free verse lacked sufficient imagery and poetic diction to distinguish it from the more flaccid poetry of the times. Though the blackman had entered the American literary scene and had achieved some (small) recognition, he had not yet penetrated to the upper echelons, had not yet liberated his poetry from the weaknesses of the age.

The "Harlem Renaissance" saw the genesis of a freer, less conventional poetry dominated by the figures of Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and the more conservative Countee Cullen. It was about this time that Negro poetry was fused

into a coherent, more self-conscious movement. Other major figures of the twenties were Sterling Brown, a writer of folk-type poetry; and Arna Bontemps, a conventional poet also known for his prose. The thirties were dominated by Frank Marshall Davis, known for a semi-surrealistic imagery, and Richard Wright, better known for his novels. The chief figure of the late thirties and early forties (and, in my opinion, the top black poet of this century) was Robert Hayden. Not surprisingly, in 1965, Hayden was awarded the Grand Prize for Poetry at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. Perhaps of all Negro poets, he is the greatest master of free verse, of smooth poetic diction, and of strikingly potent imagery. The late forties witnessed the rise to national recognition of Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first Negro to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1949. Following her in time, but not in quality of output, is Leroi Jones, chosen by Negroes as their favorite poet in a survey by Negro Digest.

Certainly it should be no great surprise to discover that some of the principal themes of the Black poets are these: love, death and morning.

As with all people of a specific heritage, there are black themes peculiar only to black American writers. Many of these themes are derived from the tortuous, fetid jungle that is Negro history, a history pockmarked but, in its own way, glorious. Few black poets could ignore it. In this, Negro poetry resembles Irish and Russian poetry of the twentieth century, both of which draw heavily upon the past to say something to the present, to the future--to say something timeless. In the Word, Yevtushenko reincarnates the dead hero-poets of Russia, Yeats recalls the stormy rebellious politicians of Ireland, and Robert Hayden (for one) in "Middle Passage" breathes artistic life into the nostrils of dead slaves.

And, true sons of Ezekiel that they are, many Negro poets maintain a bitter attitude toward the past and often toward the present.

Others, not trying to file away the past, are unwilling to have it prolonged unnecessarily into the future.

This, the most common theme, perhaps is the basic one of "Man's Inhumanity to Man," the inhumanity that makes blacks invisible and nameless, when it does not actually prosecute them. This, with the others mentioned, make up the Black Experience, and this, I suppose, is the Black Theme.

TWO BLACK POETS CITED

Hayden and Jones are the big ones. A nation or race is fortunate if it produces one great poet in a century; the Negro, in my opinion, has given America two. The first is Robert Hayden, an English professor at Fisk University. Hayden has unmistakable felicity with images and with the bon mot, "Aloft," "tin" and "glass," in one of his poems, tell the whole story. Hayden's strength is that he never abandons the precision of language, never surrenders poetic consciousness, as some black poets do when considering the persecutions to which their race has been subject.

Hayden's obvious advantage over many Negro poets is his mastery over language, an area in which many black poets falter. Hayden doesn't feel it necessary to discuss solely black themes, nor to discuss other themes, solely in black terms. He is opposed to having his work judged by any other standards than those applied to all poets.

Leroi Jones, on the other hand, would probably include himself in the group which is seeking a "black criterion." Known for his black nationalist leanings, Jones has nevertheless produced a free-flowing and somewhat evanescent style. Not given to conventional poetic diction or the striking images of a Hayden, he is a painter in plain words of the foggy climes of the emotions or the shifting tides of the mind. His poems seem to attempt to "home in" on a feeling or a thought which perpetually evades his reach, leaving him lonely and barren of the complete understanding he seeks.

His is a meditative verse that always walks, never runs. Even the slow rhythms of the lines are constructed to suggest deliberative thought. His attitude is most often one of mixed despair and pity--and, I am surprised, he does not plug his poems with political statements.

I single these two out, because I think they exemplify the best in black poetry and demonstrate that poetry is more successful when it is not overtly political, when it remains in its own proper sphere, the moral universe.

NEED FOR BLACK CRITERION QUESTIONED

There are some black critics who are calling for a black criterion by which works of black artists may be judged. They cite the poverty and depravity of Western culture as proof of the need for new means of evaluating their own writing. That Negro writing has, for the most part, been neglected by most white critics must be admitted; but this is hardly a reason for abandoning the methods of Western criticism, especially the newer, ontological criticism of this century. If one is so disposed, he may condemn white Western culture for cruelty, prejudice, etc.; but in issuing a condemnation of Western criticism, he ought to keep it in mind that Western criticism is the only fully developed one in the world. Criticism began with Aristotle. (Eastern cultures do have a criticism of sorts, but its accentuation is more on textual correction and variation.) Nor would it be unhelpful to consider whether or not Afro-American culture is itself a part of Western culture. Certainly if one were to compare Afro-American writing with native African writing, he would certainly have to judge Afro-American more Western than non-Western.

Aside from considerations of cultural classification, Negro art (and all art, for that matter) without objective criticism will inbreed, weaken, and die. Joyce's (and Aquinas') principle was one of aesthetic distance and is perhaps applicable here. To view a thing objectively and rationally, one must stand aside from it awhile, temporarily abscond his immediate involvement. Joyce did it by literally leaving the scene, and perhaps it is not without significance that the black

novelist, Richard Wright, wrote most of his work in Europe, that the best sociological study of the Negro situation was that of Gunnar Myrdal, a Swede. The problem with a solely black criterion is that it may be unable to achieve necessary distance, since, presumably, it will play down any "white" criteria. Its supporters, I believe, have forgotten that even one's most hostile opponent can and often does validly criticize. Hence, I must side with black writers of the frame of mind of Robert Hayden--those writers who want their works to meet all standards.

All of which leads back to Negro poetry. As a movement, Negro poetry is still in its infancy, still chained to its too-recent genesis. Thus many of its initial themes are still used and mostly overused today. (Actually I should say "abused" since no universal theme can ever be completely worn out--but its presentation can be and often is tediously repetitious.) I am thinking in particular of the "Man's Inhumanity" theme. All too frequently, it degenerates into statements of almost cliche character and is abused to justify the abandonment of diction, rhythm, and imagery, in short--of verse, in much black poetry. Blatant allegory, peopled by such stereotypes as the white hunky cop, becomes the black antithesis of the time-worn white myth which pictures the Negro as drunken, lazy, and promiscuous. Neither, of course, allows for the innumerable, sometimes indistinct shades of gray that color the reality which is life. Poetry, to maintain an identity distinct from prose, is less concerned with what is being said than with how it is being said. Those black poets who surrender symbol and image for the obvious and trite produce works that rival underwritten prose at best. Poetry is also controlled; it makes allowances for understatement but never for histrionics. Much (certainly not all) black poetry suffers from insufficient mastery of language and loss of control. Allowances can and must be made, though not in a patronizing manner, such as that of the market, because all art must have beginnings, and all beginnings are by definition undeveloped.

The really important thing is that, with poets such as Brooks, Hayden, and Jones, blacks will begin to have a more firmly based, sounder tradition from which to advance, precisely because these three in particular merit consideration as major poets and not only as major black poets. My hope (and the odds favor it) is that their poetic torches be forwarded.

Charles Jeronis
St. Charles Seminary